

## **Engaging New Voices on Genetic Technologies**

### **The Generations Ahead Convening of Women of Color and Indigenous Women**

Advances in science and technology allow us to communicate more rapidly across the globe, address acute medical problems with new devices and techniques, and potentially devise ways to reduce human impact on our environment. But what happens when science is turned increasingly inward towards the very material that makes up human life and technology allows for the manipulation of those very building blocks of life? Genetic and reproductive technologies are developing more rapidly than ever before.

From September 14-16, 2008 Generations Ahead convened 22 women of color and Indigenous women leaders from across the United States to discuss these issues and more. They discovered that each community had distinct perspectives and concerns about emerging genetic and reproductive technologies. They also affirmed that these distinctions together formed a nuanced and holistic expression of what's at stake for women of color and Indigenous women. From eugenics to criminalization, exploitation, and bio-colonialism these women affirmed that the potential harm – as well as the opportunities -- posed by these technologies were too critical to be ignored.

#### **The Generations Ahead Stakeholder Convening**

Generations Ahead decided that what was most needed was a convening that focused not on specific genetic technologies themselves, but on communities' experiences with and values concerning the use of genetic technologies. This would establish a “where have we been” and “where do we want to go” analysis.

To achieve this, Generations Ahead applied their organizational model for stakeholder convening's -- a model for bringing diverse groups together to learn about and discuss controversial new topics in genetic and reproductive technology.

First, with the help of an advisory committee of key reproductive justice and Indigenous peoples rights leaders, Generations Ahead conducted strategic outreach to ensure that the **right people were in the room**. This included important thought-leaders in the reproductive rights and justice, disability rights, LGBTQ rights and Indigenous rights sectors -- women who are influential in their organizations and sectors, but also open, curious and willing to change the way they think. Participants at the convening included four Indigenous women, six Asian women, five Latinas, and seven African American women, with some women claiming multiple, mixed race identities.

As a result of this outreach, more than 20 organizations were represented at the convening. Many of these organizations had not worked together before, so Generations Ahead began the gathering itself by **building positive relationships and trust** among participants. The group engaged in “getting to know you” and trust-building activities, to build a sense of connectedness and inclusivity, and to generate a safe space in which to have hard conversations.

Once a high level of trust was established, Generations Ahead facilitated small group discussions to **increase understanding of the issues**, identify sector-specific perspectives and explore differences among these perspectives. The participants self-

## **Engaging New Voices on Genetic Technologies**

### **The Generations Ahead Convening of Women of Color and Indigenous Women**

divided into constituency-specific groups: Asian, Latina, Indigenous, African descent, and women with disabilities, to discuss how genetic technologies impacted themselves and their communities. Each group then shared key points in their discussion with the rest of the group to increase understanding about the complex ways in which these issues affect different communities.

What emerged from these small group discussions and presentations is a rich picture of how, even among women of color and Indigenous women, there is a **diversity of perspectives**, concerns and impacts. The details of these diverse experiences can be the basis for sound policies and inclusive applications of genetic technologies.

Lastly, the participants generated a set of **core values and principles** they felt were critical to providing humane guidance in the use of genetic technologies. The list included principles for contextualizing genetic and reproductive technologies within diverse social and cultural contexts, and for prioritizing those most impacted within agenda-setting for these technologies.

#### **The Power of a New Analysis**

By the end of the convening, a new analysis had emerged for grappling with the complex issues of emerging genetic and reproductive technologies. Although just a beginning, the analysis offers a strategic way for diverse communities to engage with threats and opportunities involving these technologies. By articulating both the distinct terrain of impacts for Asian, Latina, Indigenous, African and women with disabilities, and also a set of common values for developing and applying these technologies, this new analysis allows historically marginalized communities to advance constructive applications of these technologies within a precautionary context grounded in their own lived experiences.

This is a radically different paradigm from the one within which genetic technologies are being developed and used today. In contrast to the profit-driven technological imperative of the marketplace, the values in this analysis are human centered, community-centered, respectful of diversity, and transformational on practical and spiritual levels. The analysis allows these communities to acknowledge critical differences in experience while affirming this common path forward, thereby strengthening the possibility of collaboration in the face of potentially divisive issues.

The participants and co-sponsors of this convening are poised to become a new generation of leaders who can shape the future of genetic and reproductive technologies within a social justice context. With continuing support from Generations Ahead, this convening will prove to be just the starting point for expanding this network of allies to include more organizations and sectors impacted by these technologies. By expanding the number of stakeholders at the table, Generations Ahead is doing its part to ensure the development of truly inclusive policies and practices for emerging reproductive and genetic technologies.